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ABSTRACT

Many different philosophies of education have been recommended for improving the public schools. A look at the history of education in the United States shows that the one certainty is change. A perennial question is how high standards should be set. Related questions are those of aligning learning opportunities with the standards and constructing appropriate tests. Charter schools, vouchers, phonics and whole language approaches to reading instruction, and cooperative learning are among the strategies that have been proposed to improve public school education. Some advantages and disadvantages of each are discussed. Another frequently debated question is that of heterogeneous versus homogeneous grouping for instruction. New methods of assessment, including approaches that use portfolios, are advocated. All of these are issues that need study, analysis, and synthesis to develop improved educational practices. (SLD)

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Assessing Different Philosophies of Instruction

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ASSESSING DIFFERENT PHILOSOPHIES OF INSTRUCTION

There certainly are different philosophies of instruction recommended for improving the public schools. These can be quite different from each other. No doubt, one of the reasons for criticizing the public schools is the lack of agreement on what should be emphasized in the curriculum.

Criticizing the educational system has always been in vogue. When viewing systems of schooling in the United States, the following have been in existence since the beginning:

1. Dame schools transported from England to the United States in 1607 with the founding of Jamestown colony, but more so later on such as in Plymouth Rock (1620) and Massachusetts Bay (1630) Colonies. These were elementary schools where a woman in her home would teach the rudiments of reading along with doing her house work.

2. Latin Grammar Schools emphasized secondary school instruction, generally in Massachusetts Bay colony, beginning in 1630.. Puritans believed in each pupil being able to read. Reading from the Bible was paramount. The Latin language was the medium of instruction.

3. town elementary schools began in the later 1600s and taught the 3rs --- reading, writing, and arithmetic. They replaced the Dame Schools with a curriculum that was broader in scope than reading instruction alone.

4. the Lancastrian Monitorial Schools, beginning in 1803, taught large numbers of elementary age pupils (such as 1,000 in a single large room) by a master teacher who supervised and taught monitors. The monitors in return each taught a benchful of boys, numbering ten approximately. These inexpensive schools helped educate more pupils than formerly and helped to bring on the public school system.

5. the Boston, Massachusetts Classical School (1821) replaced the Latin Grammar Schools, although private academies, advocated by Benjamin Franklin (starting in 1750), had also replaced numerous Latin Grammar Schools due to offering a much broader and practical education, including the classics as well as vocational education (Ediger, 1974).

When viewing and reflecting upon the above dates and types of schools, it is quite obvious that there had been dissatisfaction with American schools and drastic changes and modifications made from 1607 to the early 1800s, let alone the <u>many</u> changes that have occurred since that time. It appears that one thing is certain and that is <u>change</u> which is continuous and these will now be discussed.

How High Should Standards Be Set?

This is a perennial question. Those advocating setting high

standards (objectives of instruction) have never stated how high these standards should be. Also, it has not been clarified if all in the public schools need to achieve these standards. After all, there are mentally retarded pupils as well as those with different kinds of handicaps that hinder more optimal academic achievement. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has faced the same problem. From their tests results as taken by pupils, the NAEP provides information on how well pupils are doing on selected age levels. Generally, the results are not too encouraging. Might it be that the test items are too complex, thus making for low pupil achievement? After all, test items can be written at a more complex level as compared to being easier to answer. The author told his Methods of Research ED 680 class that a test could be written whereby everyone got all responses correct as well as writing a test where all the items could be missed, unless guessing was involved.

With high standards or objectives determined by the state department of education, there still is the problem of writing each multiple choice item clearly so no leeway exists for interpretation. Pilot studies should be made of all possible tests before they are used in testing public school student achievement and progress. The level of thinking to be tested also needs to be evaluated. Facts, largely or only, may be tested. Or, more complex levels of thinking may be stressed such as comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom, 1956). It does become increasingly difficult to write multiple choice items that measure higher levels of cognition.

From the teacher's point of view, there are problems in aligning learning opportunities with the high standards. Then too, selected teachers and principals may take an inordinate amount of time coaching pupils on test taking. Drill, rote learning, and memorization may occur in these situations. If high stakes testing is involved, the following may and have occurred:

1. teachers teaching toward the items on the test in a direct way.
2. principals and teachers changing pupil's incorrect to correct answers on the response sheet.
3. teachers and administrators telling correct answers to pupils during testing time.

Advantages provided for giving high stakes tests to pupils are the following:

1. pupils might achieve at a higher rate than would otherwise be the case.
2. teachers may be motivated to do a better job of teaching.
3. pupils have not achieved at an adequate rate previously and increased motivation is necessary.

Charter Schools

Generally, charter schools are those formed within a school system in which selected teachers and administrators believe they have a better curriculum to offer than what exists. The charter school receives its money to operate from public school moneys. Usually, room space is provided by the local public school. Teachers and administrators in a charter school are not bound by the red tape that the public schools must abide by.

Disadvantages given for charter schools are the following:

1. they may be selective on who is admitted to their schools. Handicapped children may then not be permitted in a charter school.
2. they operate with little in the form of accountability.
3. they have too any advantages that public schools do not have, thus their test results may be superior.

Advantages for charter schools are the following:

1. they may be quite innovative in using new teaching strategies.
2. they offer hope to selected parents in having their children achieve more optimally in an alternative to pubic school education.
3. they offer chances for competitiveness in challenging the public schools to improve the curriculum.

Vouchers

Vouchers provide parents the chance to use the local tuition moneys to go to a school of personal choice. Money for tuition would go from the sending to the receiving school. Public schools are then challenged to offer improved instruction or parents will use the local tuition money to spend at a different school as chosen by involved parents.

Disadvantages given for pupils attending a school where voucher moneys are used are the following:

1. transportation money is not included in the transaction. This could be a big item of expense for many parents.
2. private schools chosen may conflict with the separation of church and state.
3. private schools can reject the acceptance of some pupils whereas the public schools need to take in any and all pupils.

Advantages provided by selected lay persons and educators for having vouchers include he following:

1. they offer choices to parents in choosing a school for their offspring to attend.
2. they offer competition to the public schools, as advocated by

free market advocates. With increased competition, better teaching will result for all learners.

3. they offer variety in terms of teaching and learning situations. The variety factor may assist pupils to achieve more optimally since choices in learning opportunities are in evidence (See Ediger, 2000, 210-211).

Phonics or Whole Language Approaches in Reading Instruction?

A major debate has been going on for some time about the phonics versus whole language procedure in the teaching of reading. How much of each does a pupil need to become proficient in the act of reading? Here, the issue becomes the amount of phonics needed by a learner. Systematic phonics may be stressed with its very own scope and sequence. Or, phonics may be taught minimally as necessary in context when whole language approaches are used.

Disadvantages given for systematic approaches in teaching phonics are the following:

1. meaning is being omitted in obtaining ideas as compared to more holistic procedures in the teaching of reading.
2. abstract learnings in phonics are difficult for pupils to acquire.
3. phonics taught in isolation separates word identification techniques from securing subject matter ideas.

Advantages provided for phonics instruction in a systematic manner include the following:

1. it provides techniques for learners to use to unlock unknown words.
2. it provides security to pupils to be able to determine any unrecognized word.
3. it provides basic, essential learnings to pupils in learning to read. Phonics is useful too for those on higher grade levels who have failed in learning to read at a satisfactory level (Ediger, 2000, 20-29).

Cooperative Learning versus Individualized Instruction

The pendulum certainly has moved toward favoring cooperative learning, as advocated by educators. Thus, pupils learn together within groups. The better learners serve as role models for the others. They also assist the less able pupils to achieve at a more optimal rate. Gardner (1993) identifies eight intelligences possessed by learners. Two of the eight deal with interpersonal learning as compared to intrapersonal learning. The former stresses that some pupils do better in group work as compared to individual endeavors. Their favorite way of revealing what has been leaned is through group or committee

endeavors. Intrapersonal intelligence is possessed by those who who work better and achieve more optimally by the self. The latter reveal what has been learned best through an individual endeavor.

What then are the disadvantages of collaborative learning?

1. it is not the intelligence possessed by selected pupils. All need to learn to work together well, but as a sole method of leaning, cooperative learning has its negative side.

2. gifted/talented pupils may not achieve as optimally as possible due to helping others continually.

3. it is difficult to evaluate the progress of each on a committee, as compared to pupils working individually.

Advantages given are the following:

1. pupils can learn social skills in attempting to get along with each other.

2. assistance may be given to each other as needed.

3. societal endeavors require cooperation in problem identification and seeking solutions (Ediger, 2000, 41-46).

Heterogeneous versus Homogeneous Grouping

With heterogeneous grouping of pupils for instruction, mixed achievement levels are in one classroom. Usually, the mixed achievement levels of pupils in one classroom is planned. The belief is that heterogeneous grouping is more democratic as compared to homogeneous grouping. Also, the faster learners may assist the slower achievers as needed.

Homogeneous grouping stresses uniform achievement of learners in a classroom. This too is planned for. The attempt here is to obtain as uniform a group of pupils in achievement as possible within a single classroom.

Disadvantages given for heterogeneous grouping are the following:

1. the range of achievement is too great for a teacher to truly provide for the needs of learners.

2. the teacher may teach to the middle level of achievement and thus hinder the fast and slow learners from achieving optimally.

3. gifted pupils tend to lack stimulation from assisting slow learners in order for the latter to become motivated pupils for achieving, developing, and growing.

Homogeneous grouping has the following disadvantages:

1. a class of slow learners may have no role model to emulate, such as from a gifted/talented learner.

2. slow learners in a single classroom are left with feelings of being inferior.

3. a teacher may have preferences for teaching a single level of pupil achievement such as the gifted and has been assigned to teach a

different level such as slow learners.

Advantages given for homogeneous grouping are the following:

1. the teacher has less of a range of pupil achievement to teach toward.

2. gifted and talented pupils may motivate each other's thinking more so as compared to heterogeneous grouping.

3. teachers tend to prefer uniform achievement levels of pupils in a classroom. (See Shepherd and Ragan, 1982).

Portfolios and the Assessment Process

Portfolios have certainly been given much attention recently as an approach to assess pupil achievement. Constructivism as a philosophy of evaluation is then in evidence. Pupils' products/processes are assessed in context by the former with teacher assistance. Immediate assessment may then be in evidence. Whatever a pupil has difficulty with may be given attention with diagnosis and remediation. Thus, pupils and teachers do not need to wait for machine scored results from the state department of education as is true of mandated tests, developed by an outside group, such as on the state level.

Disadvantages given for using portfolios to evaluate pupil achievement are the following:

1. they are difficult to appraise since each portfolio should be appraised by two professionals. Agreement upon quality may be difficult to come by with Interscorer reliability.

2. they cannot be machine scored and thus it takes time to appraise each portfolio.

3. they do not have the numerical results, such as percentiles, to make it easier to report pupil progress to parents.

Advantages for the use of portfolios to evaluate pupil achievement are the following:

1. they show actual pupil achievement with their products and processes, not a test score alone.

2. they indicate sequential progress when observing earlier with later products/processes of the learner.

3. they can indicate a broad scope of what a pupil is achieving as compared to testing of learners with multiple choice items (Ediger, 2000, 22-31)..

Conclusion

There are vital issues that need to be studied, analyzed, and synthesized. These issues tend to indicate different philosophies of education which make educators and the lay public view quality education from diverse perspectives. A study of the philosophy of

education has much value for teachers and administrators. Philosophy assists to clarify issues and seeks to make then more meaningful and useful. Perhaps, improved educational practices will be an end result.

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